

From Central Africa to Buffalo: Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Rwanda, and Burundi



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide and that these facts will not be applicable to all refugees from the Central African region that you meet.

A Brief Background

For the past several decades Central Africa has been wrought with conflict, including both civil wars and international conflicts. Many different ethnic groups are involved in various capacities, creating tensions within and between countries.¹

Do not assume that individuals from the same country are of the same ethnic group or religious affiliation. There are important differences among the ethnic and tribal groups, and because of the longstanding tensions among some of the groups it is important to respect these differences.

These conflicts have resulted in millions of refugees and internally displaced people throughout the countries in Central Africa. In particular, the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are wide-scale and have involved surrounding countries (including the Central African Republic and Burundi) in recent years.²

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

From 1998-2003, the DRC was involved in the deadliest war in African history, the Second Congo War, and its formal end did not bring an end to conflict.³ Disputes over resources and political ideologies have bred violence, as have conflicts with neighboring countries, including spillover from the 1994 Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda.⁴ Many refugees that come from the DRC have been victims of human trafficking and sexual violence.

Central African Republic (CAR)

The ongoing conflicts in the CAR are often summed up as “religious tension,” but there are several factors to the ongoing violence. The conflicts over the years have been based widely on ethnic tensions, foreign interference and government weakness.⁵

While religious identity is important, it was not until early 2014 that the minority Muslim group began to seek refuge elsewhere, due to violence and oppression from the majority Christian groups.

Burundi

Burundi is a small nation that has faced violent conflict for many years. The phrase “1972 Burundians” refers to a group of Hutus who were systematically oppressed and forced to flee due to violent persecution from a primarily Tutsi-run government.⁶ There are three ethnic groups in Burundi: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. The Hutu and Twa peoples have faced persecution for many years.

Refugees from Burundi had fled to countries including Rwanda, the DRC, and Tanzania for refuge – with a large number fleeing to Tanzania in 1972. However, ongoing conflict in Rwanda and DRC and systematic abuse by the Tanzanian government has forced many of these refugees to seek safety elsewhere, including the United States.⁷

Social and Familial Values

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The dominant religion is Roman Catholic, with 50% of the population practicing. The remaining population is composed of 20% Protestant, 10% Kimbanguist, 10% Muslim, and 10% other.⁸ Religion plays a large part in everyday life and is supposed to provide sanctuary in times of trouble, and religious leaders are highly regarded within the community. Often, traditional African beliefs are integrated within Christian and Muslim practices.

The Congolese people are a mixture of over 200 ethnicities, though most of them are Bantu. The four largest tribes of the DRC, Mongo (Bantu), Luba (Bantu), Kongo (Bantu), and Mang Betu-Azande (Hamitic), encompass almost 45% of the population.

Family and community are central values. Children are said to belong to the community as a whole and are taken care of by all. It is also acceptable for children to be disciplined through physical means, often being hit with a rope or stick. Polygamy is rare but is practiced by some – primarily Muslims and followers of African traditions.

Decisions of the community are usually made by a council formed of religious leaders and village elders, usually only men. Alcohol is accepted by those not of the Muslim faith, with many ceremonies and festivities ending in a sprinkling or final drink of beer.⁹

Central African Republic (CAR)

The CAR is composed of Christians (80%), both Protestant and Roman Catholics, and a 15% minority of Muslims, with a few others still practicing the indigenous beliefs. It is more common for these traditions to be integrated into the larger religions, however.

Missionary groups are prevalent in the CAR, many from the U.S. but also from neighboring countries (such as the DRC). The missionaries include Jehovah's Witness, Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, and others.

The CAR is also a patriarchal society with the same general roles for females and males as the DRC. Males are to work the fields and provide for their families while women attend to household chores and family rearing. Children are expected to respect their elders and even have different ways of speaking depending on the level of respect for the person they are addressing.

Family is a large part of life, and children are often raised closely with their extended family. The punishment for children is generally not too severe, but they are expected not to fight with siblings or bring trouble to the family by engaging in poor behavior around non-kin. Children growing up in rural areas can also often be sent to serve elder family members and perhaps receive education in a more populated area.

Marriages are sometimes arranged, and the groom is required to pay a brideprice, working for the bride's family for a number of years or putting down a sum of money. Polygamy can be found, though is not popular because few can afford it.¹⁰

Burundi

The Burundi peoples are 60% Roman Catholic, 15% Protestant, 23% with indigenous beliefs, and 2% Muslim.¹¹ For refugees living in camps in neighboring countries, religion is often an important structure in day-to-day life. Churches provide not only spiritual activities but social gatherings for the community.¹²

Burundi traditional leadership is held by a council of elders, comprised of both religious leaders and prominent personalities within the community. Women are generally expected to do the

household work while men preside at the head of the family and serve as primary provider. Women in certain asylum areas where social services are present have been able to attend more schooling and gain traditionally female employment, such as nursing or teaching.¹³

Employment Skills and Experiences

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

There is a lot of variation in skill background for DRC refugees, largely dependent upon where they have lived. Women are generally expected to take care of the family and household, but it is not uncommon for them to hold positions as traders. In more recent years it has become more common for women to be wage-earners, as oftentimes the men are simply not paid enough in their jobs (especially government positions). In addition, some refugees found employment in their first-asylum countries or learned vocational skills if trade schools existed in their camp. In general, though, there are more farmers or herders than professionally skilled workers.¹⁴

Those from the rural areas were farmers and herders, while those from the urban areas were generally either unskilled or professional workers. This may include office work, teaching, or social community work.

Central African Republic (CAR)

Most refugees from the CAR were farmers, self-employed, or unemployed. However, there are those from urban areas that had government jobs, and some, mainly Muslim, who became active in business. Women were in charge of preparing food and maintaining the household; thus, the workforce is made almost entirely of men.¹⁵ The agricultural sector accounts for over half of the country's GDP, and as 60% of the population lives in rural areas, forestry and mining are a large contributor to the economy as well.¹⁶

Burundi

Similarly, around 90% of Burundi are farmers.¹⁷ There are some who have studied vocations such as carpentry, clay-pot making, tailoring, basket-weaving (primarily women), and a small percentage who are entrepreneurs, social workers, teachers, security guards, clerks, or other professionals. For refugees, this is difficult because there is very little opportunity to use those types of professional skills within the camps.¹⁸

Language and Education

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Though there are over 200 different languages spoken, French is the officially recognized language of the DRC. There are four other major, nationally recognized indigenous languages which include Lingala, Kingwana (a dialect of Swahili), Kikongo, and Tshiluba. French is generally the chosen language for schooling, but English is also taught as a foreign language in middle and high schools around the country. Many of the refugees are bilingual, usually with at least a rudimentary knowledge of Kiswahili, a Swahili dialect, which functions as the intermediary language between peoples who otherwise have no other means of communication.¹⁹

A lack of knowledge of English is one of the most common struggles with adjustment after immigration to the U.S. The DRC's national average for those who have attained some university study is about 5%. Most obtain at least some primary and secondary schooling, although this does not guarantee their ability to read and write.²⁰

Central African Republic (CAR)

In total, around 120 different languages are spoken in the CAR, most of them part of the Ubangian languages, but some Bantu in the south and Bongo-Bagirmi dialects in the north.

French is also the official language of the CAR, although the native language of Singho has also been an official language since 1991. French continues to be the language for most formal situations and the dominant form of writing.

School is mandatory for children from the age of 6 to 14, but in 2000 less than half (43%) of children were enrolled.²¹ This number is likely far lower now due to

the fact that after the violence of the Séléka rebel takeover in 2013, many students did not return to school. The system is also debilitated by the insufficient funding from the Central African government. It is not uncommon for unpaid teachers to suddenly quit, leaving their students with nowhere to go. The CAR relies heavily on oral communication and memorization, as the literacy rates in both official languages are low.

Burundi

The official languages of Burundi are French and Kirundi, and people also speak Swahili. Knowledge of English is not common. The Burundi literacy rate was approximately 73% for adult males and 61% for adult females in 2009. For males and females from the ages of 15-24 the literacy rates were higher and more equal, with 77% for males and 76% for females.²²

It is common for Burundi refugees to spend extended time periods in the asylum camps of neighboring countries. Many provide free primary schooling, and boys and girls are equally present in these lower level classes. Girls have a tendency to drop out once they reach secondary levels of education, although overall attendance for both genders is spotty. It is also difficult for students to practice the materials they learn in the camps because of the lack of opportunity.²³

Medical Information

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Because of the heavy presence of violence within the DRC, the vast majority of refugees have experienced some sort of trauma. In addition, the prevalence of sexually based violence has led to the spread of certain diseases, such as HIV, and other medical complications, including mental health problems. Common diseases found in refugees include tuberculosis, hypertension, vision problems, and heart disease, along with symptoms of back pain and arthritis due to the physically demanding lifestyle.

The idea of mental illness is generally not discussed or fully understood. A psychiatrist may be a foreign concept to many Congolese as they value privacy and would find it difficult to provide such personal information to a stranger.²⁴

Because of many people's integration of African tradition into their overall religion, there may be suspicions of witchcraft when sickness arises. However, Western healthcare methods are generally accepted and practiced by the Congolese. Many supplement this with the healing power of prayer or traditional methods as well. Traditional methods may include medicinal plants or the use of supernatural forces.

Central African Republic (CAR)

The CAR partners with the World Health Organization (WHO), allowing Central Africans to receive immunization for diseases such as measles, tetanus, diphtheria, etc., but the percent of the population that actually receives them is very low. The CAR has high rates of HIV/AIDS cases. Other prevalent diseases are malaria, schistosomiasis, and meningitis. The only significant hospital is in Bangui, but there are government and private medical facilities which have taken the place of many traditional medicinal practices. There is still widespread belief in sorcery and a faith in protective charms to keep away illness, even among the Christian population.²⁵ The majority of mothers are used to at-home births with midwives to attend to them. Infant and child mortality rates are high, and one in five children does not live past the age of five years.²⁶

Burundi

In Burundi there is knowledge of and faith in Western medicine, but herbal or traditional medicines are generally used when modern medicine is unavailable or too expensive for the family. Because of the integration and practice of traditional African beliefs, a death will sometimes be associated with witchcraft and regarded with suspicion.

In Burundi the government pays for a very small percentage of healthcare for its citizens, necessitating health care providers to place the majority of the burden on the patients themselves. With such high costs it is common for people to have to give up days of pay in order to pay for a medical consultation.²⁷

Fortunately, this population has a low percentage of HIV, but there is a higher risk for malaria. It is also important to remember the prevalence of violence and sexual abuse that the majority of refugees have either seen or experienced themselves, either in the country or in asylum camps, and the mental toll that this takes.

Resettlement Experiences

In working with refugees, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, due to past experiences such as torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.¹

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

In an attempt to escape the country's violent background and frequent human rights infringements, large numbers of the Congolese population (many of them persecuted ethnic minorities) flee to neighboring countries for temporary asylum before seeking more permanent resettlement in a country such as the U.S. The general conditions of these in-between homes for refugees are poor, though there is large variation between the nine neighboring countries. The numbers which continue to pour out of the DRC put a population strain on the existing accommodations, making any work opportunities difficult to find as well as increasing the problem of sexual violence. This problem plagues females both within the DRC, which is regarded as the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman, but also across the entire spectrum of neighboring settlement areas, whether they be tightly-packed camps or agricultural plots. Refugees with extended stays in these camps face the chance of early pregnancy, dropping out of school, prostitution, etc., due to the lack of opportunities for advancement.

Those refugees who have lived in urban areas either in the DRC or during their time in neighboring countries will have a better idea of Western amenities, while those who have lived in only rural areas may not have been as exposed. However, most refugees that come to the U.S. will know how to drive and will have knowledge of cell phones and email, especially the younger generations.

After settling in the U.S., many Congolese have difficulties with laws regarding child abuse, marriage laws, and spousal abuse. This is because, typically, women are married at a much younger age than is acceptable in the U.S. and are taught to listen to the male head of the family and not speak out against abuse. Children are also physically disciplined and allowed to roam freely throughout the village in the DRC. Here it must be explained that those methods of

discipline are unacceptable and that the safety level of neighborhoods requires a more watchful parenting technique.

Central African Republic (CAR)

Central Africans generally have somewhat lengthy stays in neighboring countries' refugee camps before continuing to a more permanent settlement in the U.S. Thus their situation is similar to the DRC and Burundi in that their experiences with Western amenities will heavily depend on whether they have lived in rural or urban settings prior to voyaging to the U.S.

Children may have to adjust to the mandatory attendance policies of U.S. schools, as in the CAR attendance levels are very inconsistent and children often do not attend school.

It is unlikely that refugees will have knowledge of the English language, and many will be illiterate in their own native languages, as well.²⁸

It must also be remembered that many have been touched by the violence which plagued their country and are members of an ethnic minority that has been persecuted for years. This will leave many with cases of PTSD or other psychological damage.

Burundi

A large portion of the Burundi people will have little experience with Western amenities and will need thorough training in order to fully acclimate to life in the U.S. They also will need to be taught how to use public transportation and adjust to a work schedule that is entirely out of home and the importance of deadlines for paperwork such as bills. Their prior lives as farmers will make a strict schedule of work and public school attendance a huge adjustment.

It is likely that Burundi refugees will have little to no experience with the English language and will therefore need to learn the numeric system as well as the monetary system. A large number, especially among those coming from refugee camps, are illiterate.

In Burundi, 40 is considered elderly, and it will take some adjustment to the fact that people in the U.S. are expected to stay active in their communities and even work lives into their 60's.²⁹

But, in general, it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually.

Local Resources in Buffalo

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.iibuff.org (716)883-1900

“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Burundi Community of Buffalo

30 St. James Road, Cheektowaga, NY 14225

(716) 907-8795

Congolese Community of Buffalo

276 Vermont Street, Buffalo, NY 14213

(678) 814-2482

Kongo Dia Ntoltila Solution

1197 West Ave., Buffalo, NY 14213

(716) 602-3019

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

www.ccwny.org (716) 842-0270

“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.

Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214

www.jersbuffalo.org (716) 882-4963

JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.jfsbuffalo.org (716) 883-1914

Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring

health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213

www.jrm-buffalo.org (716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203

(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

NOTES

¹ Prendergast, John. "The New Face of African Conflict: In Search of a Way Forward." *Foreign Affairs*. March 12, 2014. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141027/john-prendergast/the-new-face-of-african-conflict>

² Shah, Anup. "Conflicts in Africa—Introduction." *Global Issues*. May 12, 2010. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/84/conflicts-in-africa-introduction>

³ Prendergast, John. "The New Face of African Conflict: In Search of a Way Forward." *Foreign Affairs*. March 12, 2014. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141027/john-prendergast/the-new-face-of-african-conflict>

⁴ Shah, Anup. "The Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Global Issues*. August 21, 2010. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/87/the-democratic-republic-of-congo>

⁵ Wood, Graeme. "Hell is an Understatement." *New Republic*. April 30, 2014. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117519/central-african-republic-conflict-africas-bloodiest-fight>

⁶ "Other Populations from Africa." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/other-populations-from-africa>

⁷ "Other Populations from Africa." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/other-populations-from-africa>

⁸ "Republic of the Congo." *CIA World Factbook*. June 15, 2015. Accessed June 23, 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cf.html>

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¹⁰ "Central African Republic." *Countries and Their Cultures*. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Central-African-Republic.html>

¹¹ "Burundi." *U.S. Department of State*. November 17, 2010. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148667.htm>

¹² "The 1972 Burundians." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. 2007. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/the-1972-burundians-refugee-background>

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ "Congolese Refugees." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/congolese-refugees>

¹⁵ "Central African Republic." *Countries and Their Cultures*. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Central-African-Republic.html>

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- ¹⁶ “Central African Republic.” *CIA World Factbook*. June 15, 2015. Accessed June 23, 2015.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cf.html>
- ¹⁷ Id.
- ¹⁸ “The 1972 Burundians.” *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. 2007. Accessed June 23, 2015.
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/the-1972-burundians-refugee-backgroundunder>
- ¹⁹ “Congolese Refugees.” *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. Accessed June 23, 2015.
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/congolese-refugees>
- ²⁰ Id.
- ²¹ “Central African Republic.” *Unicef*. December 24, 2013. Accessed June 23, 2015.
http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/car_statistics.html
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<http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/congolese-refugees>
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<http://www.unfpa.org/sowmy>
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- ²⁸ “Central African Republic.” *Countries and Their Cultures*. Accessed June 23, 2015.
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- ²⁹ “The 1972 Burundians.” *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*. 2007. Accessed June 23, 2015.
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This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

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- **Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo**
- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
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- **Afghan Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Central Africa to Buffalo: Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Burundi**



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